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SUBJECT: THE FUTURE OF THE MALAWI CONGRESS PARTY

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This is the first in a three-part series on Malawi's largest political parties.

11. (SBU) Summary: The Malawi Congress Party (MCP) is Malawi's oldest political party, and is the party of former Life President Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda. They are currently the largest opposition party with 57 seats in Parliament, and have a strong political base in the central region. However, the MCP must resolve a serious leadership challenge and broaden its support base to other regions if it hopes to form the next government in 2009. End Summary.

12. (U) The MCP, founded in September 1959, won all the seats in Malawi's first elections in 1961, except the few reserved for whites. It was the only legal party from independence in 1964 to 1993, when Malawians voted to end the one-party state. Dr. Banda, originally from central Malawi, led the MCP until his death in November 1997. In April 2003 John Tembo, the party's current president, took over the party leadership from Dr. Banda's successor Gwanda Chakuamba. Tembo, a prominent figure in Banda's government and widely acknowledged to have been the "party hit-man" for Banda, has ruled the MCP with an iron fist since assuming control.

The Constructive Opposition?

13. (U) In the 2004 elections the MCP failed to win any parliamentary seats outside the central region. However, Tembo managed to consolidate the MCP's support in seven of the nine central districts. In Parliament the MCP won more seats than any other political party, fielding a number of young, well educated candidates. However, the party lacked an outright majority (having won just over 30% of the seats), and was thus pushed into the opposition. John Tembo also believes he won the 2004 Presidential election, which most observers cited as flawed.

14. (SBU) At the same time, the MCP is finding it difficult to establish itself in a constructive role as the opposition in Malawi, and its leaders are grasping for ways to take credit for issues they bring up. The most prominent example is the perceived success of the past year's fertilizer subsidy, for which the Mutharika government has largely taken credit, despite the fact that it was Tembo who brought the issue to the forefront of public debate and forced the government to deliver a much larger subsidy than originally planned. This has made the MCP even more mistrustful of the

government, and averse to constructively working with Mutharika.

Challenges for the Future

15. (U) The MCP's failure to win any parliamentary seats in the December 2005 by-elections (which were only in the North and the South) strengthened the view that the MCP is exclusively a central-region party. For the party to gain a majority in Parliament, it must break out of its traditional power base and win supporters in other regions of Malawi. However, the challenge of expanding into the northern and central regions is compounded by two factors: John Tembo's leadership style and the growing attractiveness of the President Mutharika's Democratic Progressive Party (DPP).

A Problem at the Top

16. (SBU) Like most party leaders in Malawi, John Tembo treats the MCP as his personal fiefdom. According to a leading party 'rebel' and MCP parliamentarian, Bintony Kutsaira, the party's parliamentary caucus rarely meets, and when it does it is mainly to hear what plans Tembo has for the party. The party's shadow cabinet has only met once in the three years since Tembo assumed leadership. The party leader clearly does not value consultation, and often tries to intimidate the party rank-and-file (he once told an MCP MP who opposed him on a decision that if the man had done so during Banda's time Tembo would have had him killed). While older members of the party seem willing to back Tembo, younger more ambitious members have been privately, and publicly, complaining about his leadership over the past six months. Unlike the older party stalwarts, the younger members are not products of the era of unquestioning loyalty that existed during Dr. Banda's regime.

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17. (SBU) Tembo is also a feared man, not only in the party, but also in the country at large. This is due to his role as Dr. Banda's right-hand man. Many opponents of the Banda regime were thrown in jail or murdered, and it is generally believed that Tembo played a hand those arrests and killings. MCP parliamentarians who have tried to address party issues openly have been rebuked by Tembo. A recent unsigned letter purported to be written by 39 MCP MPs outlined the dissatisfaction with the party leadership and called for Tembo to step down. One first term MCP MP has privately told Embassy officials that Tembo's leadership style makes it difficult for aspiring leaders to come in the open; thus it is only those who keep quiet who prosper in the party.

18. (SBU) Respicious Dzanjalimodzi, the party's shadow finance minister, seems a clear favorite to assume leadership after Tembo. Dzanjalimodzi has strong ties to the Banda family (his wife is Banda's grand-niece), is respected within the party, and has proved his loyalty to Tembo. However, the 73-year-old Tembo shows no signs of slowing down, and despite the internal opposition, most expect him to be the MCP candidate for President in 2009.

A Future MCP government?

19. (SBU) Tembo's main mistake since Mutharika came to power has been his inability or unwillingness to make inroads in the north and the south where support for other parties had collapsed or weakened. Tembo's opponents, who include Kutsaira and Zulu, claim that he is unable to campaign in the north or the south because most of the people he persecuted during the Banda regime were from the two regions. Clearly Tembo's inaction has allowed President Mutharika, with the help of government resources, to fill

the political vacuum up north and down south. In fact, even within its central region stronghold the MCP is also facing a strong challenge from the DPP. The fertilizer subsidy program and a rural roads project have made the government very popular in the agriculturally focused region.

¶9. (SBU) That said, while the party might be concerned with the rise of the DPP, at this point it seems unlikely that most rural central region voters would ever abandon the MCP. But their support alone has never been, and will never be, enough to push the MCP over the top. For this reason alone the MCP must look outside of the central region-a challenge which will be difficult as long as John Tembo leads the party.

Key MCP Leaders

¶10. (SBU) John Tembo, MCP President, Dedza-South (Central Region) - The 73-year-old Tembo spent most of his career as the hatchet-man for former Life President Hastings Banda. He now heads the MCP, though his cutthroat leadership style and refusal to share power have led some MPs to call for his resignation. Despite this, Tembo is expected to run for President in 2009.

¶11. (SBU) Respicious Dzanjilamodzi, MCP Shadow Finance Minister, Lilongwe City South East (Central Region) - Widely considered Tembo's deputy and the heir-apparent to the MCP, Dzanjilamodzi is intelligent and easy to work with. He is a first term MP. However he spent his career in the civil service, serving as the Principal Secretary in a number of ministries before running for office in 2004. His experience, along with his ties to the Banda family, articulateness and well-honed political skills, have put him in a position of prominence within the party. Respicious admits that he expects to take over after Tembo, but is careful to say that he doesn't know when that will be. In the meantime, he is content to quietly back Tembo in internal party disputes.

¶12. (SBU) Bitony Kutsaira, MCP Shadow Health Minister, Lilongwe Msinja North (Central Region) - A leader of the MCP's young 'rebel' MPs, Kutsaira is a former confidant of Tembo. Kutsaira has quietly been working behind the scenes to push Tembo towards retirement. He admits that the MCP has no chance of expanding beyond the central region as long as Tembo is its leader. However, he is unlikely to lead the

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MCP, and instead could play the role of king-maker for the next MCP president.

¶13. (SBU) Ted Kalebe, MCP Shadow Minister of Economic Planning and Development, Lilongwe North East (Central Region) - Kalebe leads the 'rebel' MPs along with Kutsaira, and serves as the most outspoken member of the group. A career civil servant and experienced economist, he entered politics in 2004. While Kutsaira is the brains behind the rebel group, Kalebe is often the one out front. As such, he is the more likely of the two to contend for the party presidency at some point.

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